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AUTHOR Marshall, Ian
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ABSTRACT

It is time that English teachers bring the important work of ecologically informed literary criticism to their students. If English teachers feel that environmental issues are important, and that environmental writing merits the attention and study of all students, then the teachers need to bring the study of nature writing into literature survey courses. Several anthologies now make nature writing available to students. Canon-making predecessors through much of the twentieth century may have dismissed nature writing as somehow removed from the "real world." Another way to bring the literature of nature into the survey course is to start respecting--and teaching--the non-fictional literature of place that traditionally gets short shrift in English curricula. Environmentally-conscious revisions to the canon--and of teaching--lend themselves to both contemporary (especially feminist and post-structuralist) and traditional critical approaches. Introducing ecological concerns to the classroom does not require any radical shift in teachers' critical values or any great expertise in the natural sciences. The advantages of a "green" classroom are many: (1) if environmental issues are of vital importance, teaching literature that addresses those issues offers a chance to change the world; (2) the greening of classrooms can introduce students to a whole realm of writing that at present receives little scholarly attention; and (3) ecological approaches to literature can teach students valuable cultural lessons. (Sixteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Ian Marshall
Penn State Altoona

The Greening of the Canon:
Ecological Concerns in the American Literature Survey Course

In a recent article in Western American Literature, Glen Love called for the "greening" of literary criticism--that is, for the development of an ecologically oriented criticism by which we could "revalue nature" in our scholarly work. Given the urgency of the environmental crisis, says Love, social responsibility demands that we do something to develop an "eco-consciousness" in our society. Ecologically-based scholarship would also help stem what he terms our profession's "retreat . . . from public life into a professionalism characterized by its obscurity and inaccessibility to all but other English professors" (211).

It appears that many scholars are heeding Love's call--so to speak. As early as 1972, in fact, Joseph Meeker in The Comedy of Survival, subtitled Studies in Literary Ecology, explored the connections between comedy and ecology. More recently, William Rueckert and Cheryll Burgess, among others, have begun the process of defining the goals and parameters of "ecocriticism." Tim Poland, in a recent article, combines the mythological paradigm of the hero-journey with the precepts of deep ecology in order to define what he calls the "ecohero." These are just a

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few examples of the exciting critical work being done to integrate literary and ecological concerns. But most of our scholarly work is, as Love says, very much aimed at others within the profession. It is about time that we bring the important work of ecologically informed literary criticism to our students. Our concern should not focus solely on how we can study literature from an ecological perspective, but on how we can teach it from an ecological perspective--and on what we should teach.

To some extent, this work is already beginning. The MLA publication Teaching Environmental Literature and several articles in the recent special issue of CEA Critic on "The Literature of Nature" offer suggestions for developing courses on environmental literature or incorporating environmental literature into composition courses. But there are drawbacks to these ways of working the literature of nature into the curriculum. Specialty courses in nature writing have a limited impact on students in general, since the students who sign up are likely to be only those who have an interest in the natural world in the first place. And relegating the study of nature writing to composition courses suggests that, though this kind of writing may be topical, and though it may offer good models for students' prose, it's not really enduring literature. If we feel that environmental issues are important, and that environmental writing merits the attention and study of all our students--on aesthetic as well as conservationist grounds--then we need to

bring the study of nature writing into our literature survey courses.

Several recent anthologies make nature writing available to us and our students: The Norton Book of Nature Writing, Daniel Halpern's On Nature, Tom Lyon's This Incomperable Lande, and Stephen Trimble's Words from the Land, all published within the last five years. But in a survey course we are not likely to use a specialized anthology as a primary text. Fortunately, plenty of environmentally sensitive writing appears in general anthologies. In American literature several recent anthologies, the Heath being the prime example, offer an expanded canon that includes (among other attractions) much American Indian literature. Environmental concerns are prominent there, of course, since native American cultural traditions assume the interdependency of humanity and nature, stressing spiritual as well as physical connections. Even in more restrictedly canonical anthologies we can find plenty of material that is grounded in the natural world--and much of it is too often neglected. Maybe it is time that we start teaching James Fenimore Cooper again; when I was in school, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student, not once was I assigned anything by Cooper. And yet, as wooden as his dialogue and as stilted as his characterizations may be, Cooper's descriptions of nature can be compelling, and his conservationist ethics are prescient. Perhaps we should pay more attention to local color writers as well, writers like Mary Noailles Murfree and Sarah

Orne Jewett, regional realists who express a sense of attachment to what ecologists might consider their "biospheres"--in the case of Murfree and Jewett, places in the Great Smoky Mountains and the Maine woods, respectively.

Similarly, by an aesthetic and intellectual standard in which attention to nature counts for something, a poet like Robinson Jeffers, whose theory of Inhumanism is akin to the biocentrism that ecology espouses, might be elevated to the status of major poet. As of the late 1920s and early '30s, in fact, Jeffers was considered a major poet, with only T. S. Eliot deemed his equal among his contemporaries (Carpenter 11); he even made the cover of Time magazine in 1932. The decline of his reputation in the mid-20th century--and that of writers like Cooper and Murfree--may have resulted from judgements that their natural subject matter made their work less important than more socially-concerned literature. But as scholars who have studied canon-formation inform us, aesthetic criteria have always been informed by other sorts of value judgements, so that domestic fiction, for instance, has long been considered--by male editors, at least--automatically less artistically significant than, say, war fiction. Our canon-making predecessors through much of the twentieth century, as they found themselves preoccupied with World Wars, a Great Depression, the triumph of industrialism and the advent of a technological society, the rise of suburbia, and the burgeoning of the Civil Rights and feminist movements, may have dismissed nature writing as somehow removed from the "real

world." But as we come to realize, both emotionally and scientifically, the extent of our losses as we have become distanced from the natural world, poetry and fiction in which nature figures large should strike us again as vital to our conceptions of what the real world is. (In the case of Robinson Jeffers, the rescue of his reputation already seems to be underway. Recently the Robinson Jeffers Association was formed and given provisional membership in the American Literature Association, which suggests that Jeffers's work does command the attention of a significant community of scholars.)

Another way to bring the literature of nature into the survey course is to start respecting--and teaching--the non-fictional literature of place that traditionally gets short shrift in our curricula. Few nature writers other than Thoreau receive much, or any, attention in most survey courses, and yet so much of the literature of place is simply wonderful--and certainly worthy of study. John Muir, for instance, deserves more attention as a late transcendentalist, one who goes beyond Thoreau in grounding his often poetic prose in close observation and scientific curiosity. Many of our finest writers today--like Annie Dillard, Ann Zwinger, Barry Lopez, and John McPhee, to compile a very short list--are neglected in academia simply because we have neglected non-fictional prose in general and nature writing in particular as important literary genres.

It is possible, of course, for an environmentally-sensitive teaching approach to work even in the absence of environmentally-

concerned material. That is, we can apply an ecological perspective even to works that are not set in the natural world or to works that express negative attitudes to nature. Just as feminist scholars at times critique works that very much reflect patriarchal biases--by highlighting their negative depictions of women or their omissions of women--so too can the ecocritic point out the absence of nature or the biases against it in works that have been considered central to our culture. For instance, a key observation we can make about Melville's much-anthologized story "Bartleby the Scrivener" is that one of the things Bartleby and the narrator are walled off from in this "Story of Wall Street" is nature. Perhaps the lack of connection to the natural world is one cause of Bartleby's despair or of the narrator's dissociation from everyone around him. My students recently offered another example of how noteworthy the neglect of nature in a literary work can be. In a course on "The Great Traditions in American Literature" that I'm teaching this semester, we began by studying American Indian literature for four weeks, and then we started into the traditional canon, beginning with Ben Franklin's "The Way to Wealth." I had intended to use Franklin to introduce several important "American" themes, such as faith in the moral value of hard work, optimism about the opportunities offered by American democracy, confidence that the individual can determine his own fate. I began the class by asking how Franklin's classic piece of Americana differed from what we'd been reading. My students pointed out immediately that the

natural world, always so prominent a concern in American Indian literature, is absent in "The Way to Wealth." Instead, the setting is a marketplace--a shift that tells volumes about the world of difference between native American and Euro-American cultures.

Environmentally-conscious revisions to the canon--and of our teaching--lend themselves to both contemporary (especially feminist and post-structuralist) and traditional critical approaches. Ecofeminists for several years have been exploring the connections between the oppression of women and the desecration of natural environments in the Western world; to use Melville as an example again, his allegorical story "The Tartarus of Maids" readily lends itself to an ecofeminist reading, since Melville draws explicit connections between mountain topography and women's anatomy. More to the ecofeminist point, the owner of the paper mill on Melville's "Blood Mountain" is clearly an oppressor of women, in the form of his female mill-workers, and a profit-motivated despoiler of the natural world. I have already suggested that another valuable approach the ecocritic can take in the classroom is to deconstruct literary works by exposing the privileging of culture over nature that is typical in western art. Several scholars have explored the connections between other post-structuralist theories and ecological principles. For instance, Patrick Murphy, Michael McDowell (a graduate student at the University of Oregon), and I, working independently, have found links between Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism and

principles of ecology. Both assume a decentering of sorts, ecology emphasizing biocentrism in place of anthropocentrism, Bakhtin a decentering of the authorial voice in the novel. Sue Ellen Campbell has found other connections between ecology and post-structuralist theory in general, in that both are anti-hierarchical and both recognize the impossibility of an objective stance. The post-structuralist theorist might say, notes Campbell, that "all readings are 'situated'"--that is, "social, political, economic, cultural, and personal circumstances" affect our readings--and the ecologist might say that "we are always involved" in nature (204).

Scholars who resist post-structuralism on the grounds that it seems not to recognize that literature deals with a real world beyond the page should also find the "greening" of the literature classroom appealing. An ecological approach to literature permits focus, or rather, demands focus on the world being described and concerns itself with a very real, immediate problem--the effect of humanity on the natural world. Traditionalists in American literature should certainly be comfortable with environmental approaches since writers and critics from Crevecoeur to Thoreau to Turner have acknowledged the importance of the land in shaping the American character; the surprising thing is that recently scholars have tended to ignore that article of cultural faith.

Whatever our scholarly tendencies, introducing ecological concerns to the classroom does not require any radical shift in

our critical values or any great expertise in the natural sciences or any abiding commitment to the tenets of deep ecology or even any great desire to preach the doctrine of environmentalism to our students. In his study of psychological findings on persuasive techniques, Scott Slovic concludes that overt classroom attempts to change student attitudes and behavior are ineffective when the attitudes of teacher and student diverge greatly. The more extreme the teacher is as an advocate, the less likely it is that student attitudes will change. What this means is that, as Slovic notes, "the presentation of a strident or militant pro-environment ideology is likely to drive non-environmentalists further away from an environmentally concerned attitude." But we need not despair of ever being able to effect change. Slovic points out that R.B. Zajonc's "mere exposure hypothesis" suggests an effective way to heighten student awareness of environmental issues. We need not be nature's advocate in the classroom; all we need to do, says Slovic, is "'expose' our students to texts in which the environment occupies a central place, in which the natural world is regarded respectfully" in order to make changes "in a constructive, non-coercive way" (12).

The advantages of a green classroom are many. First, if we believe that environmental issues are of vital importance, teaching literature that addresses those issues, or teaching any literature from an environmental perspective, offers a chance to change the world, and yes, maybe even <u>save</u> it. Second, the

greening of our classrooms can introduce our students to a whole realm of marvelous writing that at present receives little scholarly attention. Finally, ecological approaches to literature can teach our students valuable cultural lessons. Ecology teaches us that living things exist in dynamic inter-relationship with their environment and with other living things, and that the ideal of a healthy biosphere is diversity. As David Quammen puts it, "The greater the number of species coexisting in one community, and the greater number of relationships linking different species, so much greater will be the natural resistance to . . . catastrophe. From diversity comes strength . . ." (132). In an era when universities are stressing the value of multiculturalism, the ecological ideal of biodiversity seems analogous to the social ideal of cultural diversity. An ecological perspective on literature can convey to our students crucial lessons not just about how to appreciate the world in which we live and their role in it, but also about how to appreciate each other.

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